PUBLIC DOMAIN

FRANCIS BASS

MASTERS OF THE WINE PRINTERS GUILD

Masters of the Wine Printers Guild

Francis Bass

To the extent possible under law, Francis Bass has waived all copyright and related or neighboring rights to the work *Masters of the Wine Printers Guild*. This work is published from: United States.

Find more information about this license here:
https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/

Title font "Klarissa" by Dieter Steffmann.
Dingbat font "FoglihtenDeH04" by Gluk Fonts.

Yes, that is how you spell "printers guild."
No, there should not be an apostrophe.

APPRENTICES

"GOOD RIDDANCE," is what Aon did *not* say when she passed by the master's body laid out in its casket. She rapped her knuckles against the side of the coffin, like a dear good apprentice, and walked on toward the far edge of the courtyard so she could slip away easily.

The apprentices of the Wine Printers Guild filed past Ojea Master's body, knocking on the wood each, or merely brushing it with their knuckles—improper. The worse for them, they'd never advance to journeyman like that, much less master.

But what did Aon know about it? She was the oldest apprentice here. Forty years in age. Twenty-six of them spent apprenticing here. Eating, sleeping, sharpening the Masters' tools and stirring vats of oak gall ink, stirring round and round to keep it from burning—still just an apprentice though. Entrusted with even less than when she first came in.

The damn masters. The white-haired or no-haired crones couldn't die fast enough.

The last of the apprentices filed past, forming a crowd big enough it could shield Aon, allow her to slip into the shadows of the arcade, then sneak away to her task. She looked around for Racla, the young, pipsqueak girl who hung onto her every word. There she was, short blond hair bright where the sun struck it. She stood in position, half in the shadow, watching carefully to make sure that when Aon, Caot, and Joclow made off, no one would notice.

Everything was prepared.

To her right, Aon saw Caot creeping back into the shadows, only casting his gaze back once.

Aon didn't move. Her feet stuck. The journeymen were passing by the casket now, and next would be the masters, and after that they would announce who would rise up to replace Ojea Master.

Aon stared at the journeymen, far fewer than the apprentices, though still greatly outnumbering the masters. Dressed in rich greens and browns, scarves wound round their necks, they passed the coffin on the stone altar and each knocked twice. Good loud knocks, *knock knock.* Even to be a journeyman would be a wonder—to be allowed to live on her own, to be able to marry, to be paid, to be an adult—

Knock knock.

The last of the journeymen rendered their respect to the corpse, and now formed the front row of the crowd. Aon noticed Joclow Journeyman slowly shift away, towards the back, and then disappear through a doorway into the rest of the guildhouse. But Aon still didn't move. They would soon announce the new master, a journeyman to take Ojea's place, and then the new journeyman, an apprentice to take that journeyman's place. And if that name they spoke was Aon Prentis …

From the shadowed arcade at the far side of the courtyard the masters emerged, robed in red, with black scarves in loose loops. They formed a line, and the one at the front, Godle Master, approached the foot of the casket. At this end of the altar there lay a wood block, a stack of papers, a palm press, and a pot of red ink. The papers were already prepared with the key printing, a black outline of a rose. Godle master brushed red ink onto the carved wood block, a quick light brushing. Aon shivered. Mastery. Not a drop wasted, nor a second. Godle lay a paper onto the woodblock, aligning the printed outline of the rose with the carvings on the block. He took the palm press, a disk of many layers of leaves pressed together, and used it to flattened the paper against the block with firm, circular strokes. He peeled back the paper and a fully formed red rose, redder than the clothes Godle Master wore, fell out of the paper—now blank. Godle picked up the rose and placed it on the body in the casket.

Each master did the same. Eleven in all, but they were quick. They *were* masters.

If they would say Aon's name, she'd abandon the plan. She'd toil as a journeyman for as long as it took. To be able to work like they did, to have such skill, confidence, such perfect art—if they would just say her name—

Ten masters stood behind the casket, and Godle Master stood in front of it. "Our reverences have been rendered to Ojea Master, of the sixth generation. He will now repose a day, and while he does, one journeyman will bear the initiate's cap. Oedacte Journeyman, you will be a Master of

the Wine Printers Guild of Viz the City, and you will be of the seventh generation."

Of course—that was Ojea's daughter. But Oedacte Journeyman had no children to rise to take her place as journeyman—it could be anyone. It could be Aon, *it must be Aon.*

"One apprentice will bear the initiate's scarf. Ral Prentis, you will be a journeyman of the Wine Printers Guild of Viz the City, and you will be of the first generation."

Aon left the corpse and the corpses, into the dark interior of the guildhouse, to steal Ojea's old tools and inks and print wine of her own.

Caot could smell everything. Acrid, licorice smell from cooling vats of black ink; dull, bitter stench of rat shit swept into the cracks in the stone floor; ripe fruit and sweet fermentation rot, the wine they printed here—must be a bottle open, or else it was from a stain on his collar. He drank a lot last night, and tomorrow night he'd drink more, their own printed wine! Walking through the dark halls of the guildhouse his senses were crackling like a fire, his heart stamping. Soon he'd smell cherry oak, a sweet wood smell, sap and fresh forest, that was his task in all this—steal three fresh, uncarved woodblocks.

Of course, they would've stolen a used woodblock—there were probably some that had not yet degraded from the corrosive effectives of the gall ink—but that was hardly the spirit.

The spirit: fuck the masters!

The plan was to use the great distraction of the funeral ceremony to steal everything they'd need to print their own wine—Aon would get the inks and carving tools, Caot would get the woodblocks, and Joclow, the only journeyman among them, would steal the design book itself. Each guild had their own design book, and by keeping these codices of flat illustrations safe and secret, they each had total control of the production of whatever it was they printed. The whole guild system was predicated on this withholding of information, carefully doling it out as apprentices and journeymen advanced, and never sharing anything with rival guilds. But in the last twenty years or so, the ranks of apprentices had grown larger, while the masters only held tighter to their secrets. So Caot, Aon, Racla, and Joclow were going to tear the curtain of secrecy asunder.

Caot entered the printing shop where all the journeymen worked. So strange to see no one here. That was the point of course—only during a funeral did the guildhouse empty out like this. He made his way between the tight-packed tables with only pale morning light from high windows lighting his path. He'd just reached the far side when he heard a shout,

then footsteps fast approaching. Caot stumbled back from the doorway, and hid behind a shelf full of various pots of ink. He crouched down just as Joclow burst into the room, a thick book hugged to his chest. Joclow reached the other side of the room and ran into the hallway with a crash, and another journeyman tore through the room after him. Stools and tables clattered as the journeyman shoved through, and a few spent, ink-bitten woodblocks toppled to the floor. The journeyman ran out into the hallway, and Caot heard another crash. Then shouting. He crept out of his hiding place and picked through the chaos of overturned furniture, until he stood by the door to the hallway.

"What will you do then? You're out of place too." That was Joclow, Caot recognized his voice.

"I'll tell them what I saw—you, trying to steal the design book." Caot hadn't been apprentice to this guild long, so he couldn't recognize the other journeyman's voice, the one who'd chased Joclow. She was panting hard, whoever she was.

"Then I'll say I saw you at the same task," Joclow said. "Why were you back there, really?"

"Following *you*! I never did trust you, the way you're so chatty with the other guilds."

"And they'll believe you?" Joclow asked.

"Godle's my uncle you cow, they'll believe me alright. Now go, get out, you'll never be let back in here again."

Just panting for a moment. Then a long sigh.

"Fine," Joclow said.

Footsteps on stone, quieter and quieter, away toward the street door.

"Shit," Caot hissed. That was their journeyman—the only one among them who could carve! Aon, Caot, and Racla were all just apprentices, Joclow was the only one who'd ever handled the tools, and now he was gone—and the design book too! In all of Viz, this guild was the only ones that had managed to print wine, and it was those designs that let them do it.

Caot could try to steal the design book himself—but he was already wasting time, he should've gotten the woodblocks already.

And anyway, fuck the masters!

Caot had a new plan. He'd only been an apprentice here for three years, but before that he'd been an apprentice at the Illustrators Guild for fifteen.

He'd design the print himself, and *Aon* would carve it.

Racla needed to piss.

She stood half in the shadows, eyes flitting all around, to Master Godle giving his speech, to the crowd of apprentices and journeymen, to the door and the rest of the guildhouse, back to the apprentices, and one in particular, strong black eyebrows, big eyes, she'd seen him stirring a pot of ink, such graceful pumping arms—back to the journeymen, back to the doorway—

She needed to piss.

"Stand watch," it was bullshit, as bullshit as any task the masters gave the apprentices, as bullshit as the endless agitation of gall ink or re-wrapping a palm press. "And you, Racla, will stand watch," Caot had told her. Because she was the youngest, by more than a decade but who cares how young she was, she could still steal, she could still do more than this nothing task, which really didn't mean—

Caot was coming back. The close-shaved man with a dingy gray wrap, stained with various foods and drinks, walked through the doorway and approached Racla. He didn't have any woodblocks that she could tell.

Caot met her eyes and pointed back over his shoulder, towards the door. Racla gave another glance at the crowd, then followed Caot into the guildhouse, into one of the apprentice's dormitories. According to Aon, these had once held one bed each—when Aon had first joined the guild, she had a dorm to herself. Now, the narrow berth held two bunkbeds, and Caot and Racla occupied the single scrap of floor space between them.

"Racla," Caot hissed. "You missed one of the journeymen."

"I what?"

"Joclow's been caught. Locked out. You didn't see?"

"See what, I've been 'standing guard,' or whatever in God's you told me! How am I supposed to see anything if—"

"Another journeyman caught him," Joclow said. "You let another journeyman *slip out!* Get it?"

"I did not by God's I didn't, I've been doing nothing but watching, I saw you go, then Joclow go, then Aon go—"

"No matter."

"—and maybe if you'd given me—"

"*No matter*, Racla." Caot put a hand on her shoulder, and she knocked it off, banging both their hands against the wood bedframe. Caot winced. "Listen," he said. "Joclow will be no help now, and one of the journeymen has the design book. May still be watching over it. So, *I* will make the design. And you will steal a bottle of wine, so I have something to base the design on. You know where the wine cellar is?"

"Why don't I go for the design book?" Racla asked.

"You'll get caught."

"No, not I I won't. If you trust me to get the wine—"

"We don't need the damn book, *I* can make the design, *I* was apprentice at the Illustrators Guild for fifteen years!"

And got kicked out for participating in the Spring Parade riots. "And you …" Racla started.

Caot breathed heavy.

Muffled bells chimed. Not clock tower bells, too quiet, too sharp. "What is that?" Racla asked.

"It's the last part of the ceremony," Caot said. "No time. I still need to get the woodblocks, and you must procure a bottle. *Now*." He took a step forward, but there was no way out of the room without Racla moving first.

Damn and damn again, she needed to piss.

She turned and walked out of the room, and Caot hurried past her.

Did she know where the cellar was? Of course. She knew more about cellars than any of these city doves.

Her parents and the parents before them worked in a vineyard in the country surrounding Viz. They grew Redhill grapes, the very cultivar the Viz wine printers based their printings on. Maybe the only reason she got an apprenticeship in this guild, her foreknowledge of that wine. Yes, she knew cellars.

She descended into the guildhouse cellar, an odd imitation. No barrels, they didn't have woodblocks big enough to print barrels—thus no smell of oak, not much smell of wine. The wines didn't age down here, though they had various degrees of maturation based on the carving's design. Always printed into perfect maturity, ready at once.

Lamplight glittered off green glass, standing in rows on shelves. Too much light, why keep it in a windowless cellar and then light the place like a tavern?

Because the printed wine would disappear in a few days regardless. That was why almost everything printed was food and drink, things that could be consumed quickly. Higher quality inks would keep the wine corporeal longer, long enough to ship across the kingdom, but only just. Most of it was one or two-day wine. So the whole cellar was a mere storage barn, some Vizian's idea of a vineyard cellar, serving no purpose that couldn't be accomplished aboveground.

Racla perused the shelves. She was familiar with the Redhill Fine that they printed here, but hadn't seen the Redhill Rich, or the most expensive variety, Redhill Bloom. These were the bottles that had ruined the country vineyards.

Since she was born, Racla had watched the vineyards, and the olive orchards too, suffer from the ever-greater quantities of foodstuffs printed in Viz. The vineyard her parents served was one of few that still survived,

and only by patronage of their duke. Racla joined a throng of young people rushing to the city, hoping to join one of the printers guilds. The status of 'master' didn't exist on the vineyard—at least not as something the grape pickers could ever hope to attain.

Racla reached the end of a row of shelves and spotted a crate with several Redhill Fine bottles sitting atop it. Perfect! No one would notice one of these missing, jumbled together as they were. She grabbed one and stuffed it into her wrap, around her stomach. She hurried up the stairs of the cellar and almost ran into Aon.

Aon frowned at her, but Racla said, "There was a change of plan, I had to get some wine, I got some from—well, Caot will explain it."

"Okay." Aon nodded. "We should hurry now." She strode down the hall and Racla followed on her heels. Aon was the first apprentice Racla made friends with here. At first, Racla assumed Aon was a journeyman or a master, who just worked with the apprentices to help teach them.

Then she learned the truth. Aon had joined decades ago. As she progressed, the city doubled in size, young people from across the kingdom filling up the apprenticeships, all laboring to create finer and finer inks, which could supply foodstuffs to cities further and further away. The more they produced, the more grown-food farmers and bakers and brewers fell destitute, and the larger the ranks of apprentices grew. Meanwhile the ranks of the masters did not expand at all, so that by the time Racla arrived the uneven distribution of apprentices to masters resembled the distribution of serfs on a vineyard to estate-holders. And now there was as little chance of becoming a master here as anywhere else.

Unless Caot's plan worked.

JOURNEYMEN

CAOT ARRIVED TO THE EMPTY COURTYARD FIRST. After the ceremony, the body was left to repose, with the casket closed. No one would visit the courtyard until the next morning, and so with the guildhouse filled up, the courtyard, walled on all sides with no windows looking in, was the only place to work in absolute secret. Caot set out a stack of papers, a charcoal stylus, and a fresh, uncarved woodblock on the ground.

Aon arrived next, her long black hair fetched neat behind her head into a single braid, her white wrap bright in the sunlight. She held a bundle of wool cloth in her hands, which she opened on the ground to reveal a set of carving tools and three pots of ink.

"Should've brought food," Caot said. "Maybe send Racla to fetch some when she gets here."

"I saw her sneaking," Aon said. She sat down on the stone beside Caot, knees together, heels tucked underneath her. "What was that for?"

"They caught Joclow," Caot said. "I'm surprised the news hasn't spread, but maybe the masters are too embarrassed to admit a journeyman—not some hothead apprentice but a *journeyman*—betrayed their trust."

"He was *caught*?" Aon asked. "Then—then *Racla* stole the design book?"

"No, Racla just got a bottle of wine from the cellar. *I'll* design a print based on that bottle."

"But you're … but you … you weren't even journeyman at the illustrators guild, were you? And anyway they only make designs for bread, soups, lamb—"

"I damn well should have been journeyman, and master too," Caot said. "Just like you should be a master printer."

"I. No. Well, I."

"And you will—you'll carve the woodblock yourself."

Aon's mouth dropped open. Caot smiled. "I—" Aon said. "I couldn't, I've never carved—I've never handled a hard chisel or a scoop or a hair blade or a claw chisel or—"

Caot laughed.

"I—what are—it, it, you, *stop*." Aon's hands trembled on her knees. She smoothed her wrap. "We can't do this without Joclow."

"Yes we can," Caot said, leaning toward her. "*You* can! You've not carved but you have sharpened all these tools, repaired them, watched the Masters work them for most of your lifetime."

"No, no, Joclow is … no. I will get him back here. Sneak him back in—"

"We don't need him. And where will you find him, anyway?"

"At his home, or or … at the pub on Clark Street."

Caot chuckled. "*You* going into a pub? Have you ever even been?"

Aon pushed herself up and turned to leave. She almost collided with Racla as she went.

"Aon, wait!" Caot called as loud as he dared. She was gone.

"What was that?" Racla asked. "Something else gone shits?"

"No, no," Caot said. "Just an adult who still thinks she's a child."

Racla sat down cross-legged across from Caot. "She *is* a child, by your city's beliefs anyway, by your city's laws."

"She's a damn master, in a truer sense than this hag was," Caot gestured at the casket behind him. "Anyway, she'll return. 'Child' that she is, 'apprentice' that she believes herself, she won't go into that pub, and she'll come back. In the meantime, I'll draft the design. Let's see the bottle."

Racla reached down her chest into her baggy, slightly oversized wrap, rummaging around her stomach. She frowned for a moment, then pulled out a bottle, holding it out for Caot to see. The bottle bent and flapped with the motion, like a wet rag, then vanished right before his eyes. Racla's fingers closed into the empty space it left, then opened to reveal nothing but ink stains, red and black on her fingertips.

Caot shut his eyes tight and stifled a groan in his throat. Racla was the first one he'd brought on to this plan—he'd seen how despondent she was whenever other apprentices talked about one day becoming masters, how much she lit up when he suggested even the idea of breaking the masters' monopoly on wine printing. But she was young, just eighteen—when Caot was eighteen, life had been a game, sport, to him. Racla was the same.

Caot opened his eyes. "You took the wine from the mess hall. I told you, the cellar."

"It was from the cellar, swear it on my father's, I'm not an idiot—I, I don't know why it vanished like that, but it's not my fault." She clutched the left breast fold of her wrap, smearing it with ink.

"If it was from the cellar, it wouldn't have vanished!" Caot said. "Where did you get it?"

"There was a bunch of bottles just sitting on a crate, *in the cellar like you said*. And not like you did much better—you only got one woodblock!"

Caot put a hand on the small woodblock. "I was rushed. Anyway, one woodblock will do fine—Aon will carve on both sides. Now stay here." Caot rose, and Racla instantly stood up with him. "*I* will go get a bottle from the cellar, a real bottle. You took a test print, probably, or a reject. You couldn't have known. But, I will have to do the work now." He headed for the door but Racla grabbed his arm from behind.

"There's people all over, working, you'll be caught!" she said.

"Let go, there's no time!" Caot hissed over his shoulder.

"You don't need a reference anyway, I, I have an idea!"

"Flattered, but I *do* need a reference—"

"No, I'll be your reference," Racla got in front of him, to block him from the door. "I'll tell you everything I know about the wine, the bottling—the *real* stuff, from the *real* red hills!"

"Racla, let me by."

Racla glared, then stepped aside and turned her face to the ground. "Then you don't need me anyway, don't know why in god's you even asked me to help if you never needed my artless self in the first place."

Caot brushed by her, but froze before the door.

He turned back to the short-haired girl, the only one among them who really was a child, by age and not just by custom. She'd so far failed to stand guard, and failed to fetch a bottle of wine.

But Joclow Journeyman had failed too, and Caot himself had failed to get more than one woodblock.

He walked over to her. "You remember enough about your life in the country—you remember enough about the vineyard that you could describe a bottle of Redhill Fine?"

Racla didn't look up, but she bobbed her head. Caot put a hand on her shoulder, which Racla quickly batted off. "Don't touch me, I'm not a pet."

"No. No, sorry. You're right. You're an expert. You know Redhill wine better than any of these masters. Go ahead then, describe it to me, and I'll start making some sketches." Caot sat down again, picked up his charcoal stylus and set a sheet of paper before him.

"Okay," Racla said. She sat across from him again and looked up. Some hair stuck to her face. "But we're not making Fine. We're going to make Redhill Bloom."

Aon swayed standing on the wood step of the public house. The flat smell of barley ale filled her nostrils, along with pungent hash smoke. She'd not once set foot inside—apprentices weren't allowed in pubs. She knew plenty of apprentices *did* drink there (Caot, for one), and she knew she *looked* old enough, but she wasn't. The only spirits she'd ever drunk were samples of the guild's wine.

"Ay dove, coming through." Someone pushed past her, and she surrendered the step to a gaggle of journeymen, loosening dark green scarves from around their necks. The Greaber Street Bread Printers Guild. They shoved through the loose wooden door, and Aon heard the muffled chatter swell.

Many nights she heard that chatter as she fantasized of the day she'd be made journeyman. On that day she would split a bottle of Redhill Bloom with her friends, she'd eat a plate of vegetable fries, she'd propose to the first man she saw—

Aon narrowed her eyes. No time for fantasies. She'd never make journeyman anyway, but at least she could screw over the masters, if she could sneak Joclow back into the guildhouse.

Aon took a deep breath. She pushed into the pub.

She scanned the long tables piled with half-finished plates, ash trays, and mugs of beer. Many journeymen were on their midday break right now, and among them she spotted Joclow at the far end of one table. She squeezed through the close-packed chairs and sat down across from him.

"Aon." He looked up from the empty mug he'd been staring into, eyes wide. Aon recognized the signature of a master from the ale printers guild, etched into the side of the printed mug. "Hello."

"Joclow Journeyman, we need you back," Aon said. "I can sneak you into the guildhouse. We can still—"

"You got the design book, then?"

"No. No. But Caot is making a design."

Joclow ran a thumb and finger along his finely trimmed mustache. "Caot Prentis? No, no I don't think so."

"You … but Journeyman, we need a carver."

"And we need a design. One from that book."

"Caot has experience with designs. He apprenticed—"

"Of course, I know Aon. But." He took his mug and looked into it again, turning it this way and that. He turned it upside down on the table and placed a shining copper coin atop it. "I need that design book."

"Caot has, Caot has experience—"

"The design book …" Joclow breathed in. Exhaled. "I need it. That was why I agreed to do this. I would make the wood block carving, we'd print off a dozen dozen bottles, and I would keep the book. You apprentices have your fun, and I would guarantee my place as master in another guild. Or this one. Or my own. That book—thank you, the same," he murmured to the barman who took his empty mug and coin. "That book … anyway, I must think now. Try to find a printers guild that will take me on as journeyman."

"You … you were just trying to become master?" Aon said.

"Isn't that what we're all doing?"

Aon didn't know. "I'll never be master anyway," she said. "But Caot promised we'd get some money, and maybe topple the wine printers guild."

"And then what?" Joclow asked.

"Well … maybe other apprentices would do the same, and the whole guild system would fall."

"That's what Caot says," Joclow said. "And Racla may believe it. Do you believe it Aon?"

No.

"The guilds will not be toppled by some mischief."

"Maybe they'll start promoting more apprentices though."

Joclow waved a hand. He almost knocked into the barman, setting down a refilled mug of beer. "That is even less likely."

"Then I, then what do, then I just, then I'm an, I just die an apprentice?" Aon asked. "What what do I *do* then?"

"Whatever you must to advance, to journeyman and so on. Maybe if you told the masters of Caot and Racla's misdeeds—"

"No, no!" Aon said. "I couldn't. I …"

"Then you're right. You will die an apprentice."

Aon struck the tabletop with a balled-up fist, and instantly regretted it. She'd had a terrible cramp in that hand the past few days, probably from hours spent stirring ink, and now it sent stabbing pain through her wrist. Joclow offered her the mug, and when she didn't take it he drank from it himself. "Help us," Aon finally said. "We need a carver, and if we can print—"

"You have no real designs," Joclow said, "only an apprentice's sketches."

"Caot is—he was an apprentice for fifteen years!"

"And?"

"And he *should* be a master, or journeyman at least, and his design *will* work!"

"And yet he isn't."

"You said—you said—you know that has nothing to do with, with actual, with his, just because—"

"He should have been *promoted* to a journeyman illustrator, maybe, but that doesn't mean he has the skill of one, much less a master—I am more skilled than you, even though we have roughly equal years of experience."

Aon tried to utter a defense of Caot, but her throat was too tight to get anything out. She rose in an instant and left the pub.

It was past midday when she arrived back at the guildhouse. She quietly entered. Another failure, another wrong turn in their plan. She headed down the hall toward the courtyard, when Godle Master entered from his quarters, a head of white hair atop bloodred robes. "Oh, Aon Prentis. I sent some journeymen to look for you, but I can tell you myself. Maybe you have heard. Joclow has been stripped of his honor."

"Oh! Joclow!" Aon shouted. "How! Why! Uh, Master."

"He betrayed our trust," Godle Master said, "and let no more be said of it. Now, you will rise to his place as journeyman. You will take your vows tomorrow with the others, to avoid any fuss. Congratulations."

MASTERS

RACLA LOOKED OVER CAOT'S WORK. "Is … is it *all* going to be printed?"

The sheet of paper on the tiled ground before her was bursting with imagery. A wine glass filled up most of it, but the wine glass sat on a table, and crowding beside it was a cluster of fat, overripe grapes—the kind necessary for Redhill Bloom. In the background, hills rose like puffy clouds. A winery sat atop the hill in the top left corner, just as Racla had

described it—rows of columns, a low, ceramic tile roof. Caot had even drawn in a rain sprite hiding behind one of the grapes, visible only by its tall, conical hat.

"No, no," Caot said. "If I've done my work right, the glass will be the focus—only that will print. The rest will just add to its vividness, its flavor, but won't appear as full objects."

"How did you draw the glass? I mean, so that it looks round, and see-through, and …" Racla looked up at Caot. "It's like it's a printed, full object already."

Caot smiled at her, then startled, looking over her shoulder. Racla turned—it was just Aon. She slowly closed the door behind her, then approached them.

"Well?" Caot asked. "What about Joclow, then?"

"No," Aon said. "I will carve it." She knelt next to them and picked up the sketch.

"I'll need to make a copy of it still, for the color side," Caot said.

"God's name Caot, this is complicated."

"You can't carve it?"

"We have a half a day or less to do this—and here, we'll need to blend the colors," she pointed at the place where the wine in the glass overlapped the hills behind it. "We'd need a second block for that!"

"You can't carve it?" Caot repeated, grinning.

Aon held up the illustration and the block side-by-side, turning the block over and over. She handed the paper back to Caot. "No clouds in the sky, we won't color in the sky at all—or you two can do it by hand. But anyway, I'll use the extra space on the woodblock to carve out the shape of the wine in the glass."

"Wait … but then the wine will be in the sky," Racla said.

"No, we'll ink the wine last," Aon said. "First we'll ink the key—the black—the outlines." She took a blank sheet of paper and pressed it to one side of the little block. "Then the hills, and the grapes, and … whatever this is. That will be finicky, and it'd be better to carve it onto separate blocks—"

"But we can't, yes yes," Caot said.

"So we'll ink it all at once, the green for the hills, the orange for the building, the red for the grapes." She pressed the paper to the other side of the block.

"They're not really red …" Racla said.

"Then you'll tell me the right mix of inks. Anyway, we'll get all the background done, print every page with those colors. Those inks will dry, and *then* we ink the wine in the glass." Aon then shifted the paper—still

pressing it to the same side of the woodblock, but now with the middle aligned higher up.

"But how will we line it up?" Racla asked. She'd seen journeymen berated for sloppy prints—if one color was even slightly off, printed outside the lines, the whole thing was ruined, and the print would stay flat on the page.

"Registration marks," Aon said. "Though it does mean you'll have to make a third copy, Caot."

"No problem." He flashed a grin. "I got more experience making copies in the illustrators guild than anything else."

"In the meantime I might as well start clearing out the big blank areas on the key side," Aon said. From the row of tools, she picked up a chisel with a curved end, like a tiny shovel, and a wooden mallet.

"And … I … what do I do?" Racla asked.

"You could stand guard," Caot said.

"No," Aon said. She stuck the blade into the wood block and hammered at the handle. Curling licks of wood peeled back where she carved. "You watch," Aon said. "You want to be a master, watch."

Aon completed the carving for the key side by midnight. The lines were in no way delicate, not the refined hairline wisps that the masters could carve, but they were straight where Caot had drawn them straight, and curved where Caot had drawn them curved, and they were Aon's lines. Aon let her hands rest while Caot and Racla took turns printing the black outlines onto a hundred and forty-four papers. They worked by the light of a lantern that Caot had snuck into the guildhouse to retrieve. He'd also gotten two loaves of bread and a bowl of butter cheese.

Aon had felt exhaustion about to take over as she'd finished those last strokes, but now as she ate, and massaged her strained wrists, her heart beat harder, her eyelids opened wider, the cool midnight air filled her lungs and she realized this was no dream, their plan was becoming real.

She tried to steady her breathing, focus on stretching her hands.

When Caot and Racla had finished, and Aon had brushed breadcrumbs from her wrap, she set about carving the color side, and Caot and Racla carefully hand-painted the blue sky on each of the black outline prints. Hand-painting was too imprecise for the principal objects of a print, but a single stroke of blue in the sky, quickly fading out to white, was no problem.

It was still dark when they started printing the colors for the background. Aon had been right—it was finnicky, having to dab red-black ink here, green ink there, instead of just brushing the whole thing with one color.

But working together, they sped up as they went, and by the end were turning the prints out at the rate of a journeyman.

Finally, Aon mixed red ink with a very little dab of blue and, at Racla's direction, a drop of yellow. Aon brushed the mixture onto the semi-circular shape of the wine in the glass. The sky—the area above the hills and the grapes and the rest—was the only blank space big enough to carve it, so just looking at the block, it appeared as a dark, malformed sun.

Aon picked up a paper, printed with black outlines and full color except the wine, and matched the pinholes she'd punched in the sides to the registration marks carved on the woodblock. This would align the carved, inked wine shape with the printed glass on the page. She pressed the paper down with a palm press, three firm circular motions, then slowly peeled the paper back.

No wine glass stood on the woodblock. There was just a printed image, flat on the page.

Aon gasped. She coughed to cover the gasp. She hoped the lantern light wasn't reaching her face. She must look like a stupid little girl right now, pained to learn that songs are just stories.

"Did … did you line it up right?" Caot asked.

She had, of course she had. She held the page before the lantern and looked over every corner, every line, examining them for any misalignment of color and outline. Even with the paper trembling slightly, she could see they were all perfect.

The printing was perfect, ink mixtures were perfect, the design was perfect, it was the carving that was sloppy. It was her damn thick lines.

"I'm sorry," Aon said. "I've ruined them, I wasn't ready to be a master, I'm sorry."

"No—Aon, you did amazing," Caot said. "There … must've been something wrong with my design. I suppose there's a reason no other guild has managed to print wine."

"It's missing a signature," Racla said.

Caot and Aon glanced at the print, sitting before the lantern. "Of course it is," Caot said. "It's anonymous. So we don't get caught."

"But … aren't the signatures important? I've never seen prints without them. And back home, they always pressed the vineyard seal into the wax on the cork."

"I … You're right, Racla," Caot said. "It's worth a try." He took the failed print and turned it over, then sketched out four symbols in the middle. The top two Aon didn't recognize, but she knew the one on the bottom left was her name backwards.

"Wait, wait …" Aon said.

"Put mine on their too," Racla said.

"But … Look, there's a signature for the designer, and one for the carver."

"I *helped* though."

"Alright, alright."

"Wait," Aon said again. If they printed wine glasses with her name on it, everyone would know—she'd only just become a journeyman, and she'd be kicked out just like Joclow. But if they called this off now, if they just gave up, maybe she could keep working, maybe some more masters would die soon or retire their tools, maybe someday …

"What?" Caot asked. "You can carve these, right?"

She didn't have time for 'some day' anymore, she needed to be a master now. She *was*. "Yes, okay," Aon said. "I'll carve them out of the wine glass print, where it doesn't overlap with the hills, so they'll appear white."

Lining up the registration marks again she glued the paper down over the woodblock, and working quickly, hacked out the loops and crosses of their names—with the divided square, the symbol for 'master,' next to each of them. When she'd finished, she removed the defective print by applying water and scraping it off, dried the block, and brushed the mixed red ink onto the signed wine again.

She laid an almost complete paper over the block, matched up the pinholes, pressed down with the palm press, one, two, three, and peeled back so fast that the wine glass which emerged from the now blank paper wobbled, and Aon just barely caught it before it toppled off the woodblock.

The glass was oddly heavy, but the smell was unmistakable. Caot and Racla could smell it too, they leaned over the glass.

"Racla, you try it first," Caot said. "Tell us how we did. It'll mean nothing if it tastes terrible."

Racla took the glass from Aon. She held it out to the lantern, specks of gold reflecting off deep red. Racla lifted the glass to her lips and sipped.

She immediately started giggling.

"Oh no," Caot said. "What's wrong?"

"It's—haha! It's," Racla grinned so hard her eyes squeezed shut. "It's Redhill Bloom! It's a thirty-some, or a thirty-six-some! It's perfect!" She passed it off to Caot, still giggling. Caot drank, murmured something, passed it to Aon. She expected it to vanish into dribbling ink when she took hold of it again, but it didn't. She took a sip, felt her blood rush, her eyes open, rich, sweet fruit and deep, bitter, tart bite in her throat, and somehow heavier, less watery than any wine she'd ever tasted. She stared at the glass, at their names, their incriminating names printed there in white embossing.

Aon grinned. "Let's print another."

When the first light filled the square of sky over the courtyard, they had filled the area around the altar with wine glasses, set out on the ground in rows and columns, each atop the blank sheet of paper it had been printed from.

They had only a dozen more pages to print when the door swung open, and the masters entered.

The old men and women froze just beyond the arcade. Journeymen filled in past them, and apprentices crowded behind, jumping to get a look.

Caot started laughing.

Aon clutched the woodblock to her chest, staining her wrap red.

Racla picked up a glass and held it out in offering.

"What is this?" Godle Master asked. "Whose block have you stolen to print these?"

Racla turned the glass so that the signatures faced Godle.

"This is … this is … how dare you profane Ojea Master's repose with a prank? Defacing a master's block and print, printing—"

"Whose is it then?" Caot asked. "All you masters, which of you has ever carved this?" He held up the misprint.

The commotion ceased. The masters looked at the print in silence.

"We did!" Racla shouted finally. "Redhill Bloom, we designed and carved and printed them ourselves, we did we did! And it's better than the gutter wash you print too!"

"Journeymen, take that woodblock from Aon Prentis," Godle pointed a finger at her. "And you three will bear that name no longer—I strip you all of your honor—"

"What fucking honor?" Aon shouted. She stood up, locked eyes with the startled master. "You, you. You." She balled her fists, clutched the block tight to her chest, then barreled toward the masters. Looks of horror gripped their faces, and they parted. Aon shoved through the journeymen with Caot and Racla on either side, helping her through and fending off the arms of the journeymen grabbing for the block. When they reached the apprentices, they passed through with no struggle at all, and a few apprentices even slapped them on the back. Behind them the journeymen were struggling to get through the apprentices now, and shouting and shoving. Aon, Caot, and Racla tore down the hallway straight for the street door.

"Where are we going!" Racla asked.

"Let's go to a pub!" Aon said. "We're masters now!"

"And if they've got inks and paper, we can print off some wine for their patrons!" Caot said. He flung the door open and the three staggered into the bright morning air.

"And we can get married!" Aon cried.

"What?" Caot asked.

Aon ran laughing down the street, with Caot and Racla bounding after her.

Afterword

> "All this was to change with the advent of capitalism. By 'capitalism,' here I am referring not to markets—these had long existed—but to the gradual transformation of relations of service into permanent relations of wage labor … What this meant in human terms was, first of all, that millions of young people found themselves trapped in permanent social adolescence. As the guild structures broke down, apprentices could become journeymen, but journeymen could no longer become masters, which meant that, in traditional terms, they would not be a position to marry and start families of their own. They were expected to live their entire lives effectively as unfinished human beings."
>
> —David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*

This quote is the origin point for this story. I read *Bullshit Jobs* in 2020, and found it extremely insightful and helpful for understanding my own experiences with the labor market. The quote above is sort of an aside to the book's main argument, part of the section where Graeber details the origins of capitalism and our current attitudes about work.

It intrigued me enough to write it down though, and a few months later it intrigued me enough to inspire a story idea. To begin with, however, I was focused mostly on the cultural element—that idea of "permanent social adolescence." Here's how I sketched it out:

> "Something has caused a group of people to no longer have access to their rite of passage, resulting in 30 year olds, 40 year olds, that are technically still kids. A touchstone for this would be the gen Y and gen Z not being able to afford houses/cars/having kids, all markers of adulthood.
>
> "A very obvious way to do this would be a group of people where riding a dragon is the rite of passage, but all the dragons have migrated away due to climate change or w/e."

I kept rolling this idea around for a little while, but could never find a way into it that didn't feel contrived or reliant on cliché (e.g. the dragon-riding idea.)

Ultimately, I ended up taking things more head-on, grounding it in the economic reality which was the context for Graeber's quote in the first place. Rather than focusing on a moment of rapid transition in culture, the story would focus on a moment of rapid transition in an economic system.

The idea of "permanent social adolescence" survives, somewhat vestigial, in the character of Aon.

I chose printing as the trade because at the time I was watching David Bull's wonderful videos about woodblock carving in Japan. I highly recommend them if you want to learn more about the process that I simplified here. Aside from the magical element, the techniques I describe are all based on real practices—except hand-painting the sky, I don't think printers would ever do that.

I also took inspiration from actual history, reading one of the sources Graeber cited in that section, "Youth and the English Reformation," by Susan Brigden. The article describes youth culture during the English Reformation (the 16th century), and the You Damn Kids-type reactions to it, common then as they are always. In doing so, Brigden dedicates a few pages to the changes occurring in the guild system, especially in London, where vast population growth created an enormous class of apprentices who would never advance to the rank of master. Here are a few bits I highlighted:

> "The craft gilds of London had long controlled not only the economic life of the capital, but social and political life also, since only membership of one of the seventy-five or so companies conferred the freedom of the city, and with it civic privilege." (45)

> "From about the turn of the sixteenth century, mastership could no longer be the expectation of every apprentice and journeyman. As the gilds became ever more oligarchical a significant, but as yet little understood, organizational change occurred within them: the yeomanry or junior branch emerged in competition with the livery, the ruling senior members of the gild. There were frequent clashes between the 'young men' or 'bachelors' and the liveries …" (45-46)

> "The youth of London were known to be politically unstable and easy to rally to a cause. … Evil May Day was far from the first or the last youth riot in early modern England, but it was the most serious. The trouble began early in 1517 when one John Lincoln stirred 'younge and euell disposed people' to be 'reuenged on the merchaunt straungiers'. … The following day a thousand rioted, and most of the prisoners taken were 'poore prentises' and 'yongelinges.'" (47)

All this to say, Caot is probably a xenophobe for participating in the Spring Parade riots. Anyway.

Addendum: Over a year after writing this story, I started to get into print media, and I learned how to make little zines like this one. I'd been considering releasing this story to the public domain for Public Domain

Day 2023, and decided it would only make sense to also make it into a zine as well—and then it hit me that, hey, this is sort of a story about making a zine with your friends.

Obviously the "printing" they are doing is much more intensive and technical than even, say, risograph printing, but the spirit of free culture and DIY production is certainly there.

Cheers, friends!

Francis Bass
Philadelphia, PA
January 2023

This story was released to the public domain in celebration of Public Domain Day 2023. You are free to share, modify, or reproduce it any way you like. You just can't steal it, because its already yours.

Some other artists joined me in celebrating Public Domain Day by ceding their own works. To check them out, and find downloads of this zine, go here:

https://francisbass.com/mwpg

To learn more about the public domain and find some of my other public domain works, go here:

https://francisbass.com/public-domain-day

If you want to throw me some money, you can find my ebooks here. You could even name your own price for this story if you want :)

https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/FrancisBass

And now what you really need. To watch a video (not public domain!) about Japanese woodblock carving (sometimes public domain!), go here:

https://youtu.be/ij9KXgiyDAc

The printers guilds in the city of Viz can use ink, paper, and carved woodblocks to create any food or drink—but this magic is only possible using the precise techniques and designs kept secret by the masters.

In earlier times, any apprentice could be certain that they'd one day become a master, learn fully their trade, and earn more than just food money. But now the guilds are printing more and more, and the apprentices outnumber the masters, and it seems Aon of the Wine Printers Guild may live her entire life without even becoming a journeyman.

So Aon and a few co-conspirators plot to steal the masters' book of designs, print their own wine, and perhaps upend the entire guild system.

FRANCIS BASS is a writer and some other things. His work has appeared in *Reckoning*, *Electric Literature*, and others. He lives in Philadelphia. You can find him at francisbass.com. He is working on a book about cities.